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EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION PROJECTS – SIGN OF DEVELOPMENT OR MEANINGLESS PRACTICE? EXAMPLE OF THE SILESIAN VOIVODESHIP

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of studies on evaluation in Poland, which is particularly important in the context of the increasing role of evaluation practices in the implementation of projects financed from the EU funds. Evaluation played a significant role in the previous programming period, that is, 2007–2013, substantially closed (although by the end of this year still can be carried out ex-post evaluation for each of the objectives of cohesion policy). Also in the new programming period, that is, 2014–2020 evaluation is heavily exposed in the strategic documents and financial guides. The article refers to a book published in Polish.¹ The article is, however, also a supplement to the mentioned book and contains additional examples from the study. In addition, it assumes a slightly different perspective, that focuses on the function of self-improvement, which should in theory accompany each evaluation study.

The very concept of evaluation is appearing more frequently in the Polish media and policy discourse, especially in the context of projects funded by the EU. The prevalence of this concept, however, does not translate itself to a common understanding, so a brief introduction to this subject is needed.

Overall, evaluation can be defined as the systematic and objective assessment of a project – the evaluation and the implementation of the EU projects will be focused on in this text – or a different set of activities with a specific purpose, such as its objectives, the implementation and results in terms of specific criteria. It is important to mention that in the literature of the subject (Faliszek 2013), the

¹ K. Faliszek, G. Libor, R. Muster, D. Nowalska-Kapuścik, and M. Szpoczek-Sało: *Fundusze unijne zmieniają Polskę? Analiza ewaluacji projektów unijnych na przykładzie województwa śląskiego* (Wyd. UŚ, Katowice 2013).

understanding of evaluation as a procedure of assessment of the project results has many definitions, and is sometimes incorrectly understood, or even misunderstood – a later part of the article will pay more attention to this issue.

Evaluation as an operation is designed to provide accurate and useful information about the tested object, thus supporting the decision-making process and the cooperation of all stakeholders involved in the project. In the case of evaluation of the EU projects, evaluation research is a process by which all those interested in the results of the study (should) participate, which should translate into the strengthening of their capacities and self-improvement.

The article begins with a brief outline of the history of evaluation research in Poland and the present state resulting from the operation of the country in the European structures. Then, after a description of the legal and institutional framework, a function of evaluative practice with an emphasis on the function of self-improvement will be presented. A key part of the article is an analysis of research on the evaluation of implemented projects in the voivodeship of Silesia, preceded by a short discussion of the research methodology.

The Specificity of Evaluation Research in Poland

In discussing the history of evaluation research in Poland, it should be remembered that the very idea of evaluation emerged in the early twentieth century, and a Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki played an important role in its development (Korpowicz 2013). In Poland, the first mention of evaluation, however, appeared only in the late 1980s, with the assistance funds of the European Union and the World Bank.

In 2004, in turn, together with the Polish accession to the European Union there was a sudden increase in interest on this subject. One of the main reasons for this state of affairs was a mandatory requirement for evaluation of public programs co-financed from the EU funds.² By joining the EU, Poland was obliged to comply with its laws and adapt their laws to its requirements.

In accordance with the guidelines, the Council of the European Union imposed an obligation to carry out evaluation of financial assistance from the EU structural funds by issuing Regulation No. 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006, laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the

² The European Commission's Sound and Efficient Management 2000 (known as SEM 2000) enables the use of evaluation as a key element in improving the management culture of the Commission itself. The key innovation of SEM will be a requirement to include a systematic evaluation of all EU programs, see: 'Evaluating UE Expenditure Programmes: A Guide', European Commission, January 1997, p. 7.

European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (WE) No. 1260/1999.

According to the above-mentioned Regulation, evaluation aims to improve 'the quality, effectiveness and cohesion of the assistance from the Funds and the strategy and implementation of operational programs with respect to the specific structural problems affecting the Member States and the concerned regions, while taking account the objective of sustainable development and the relevant Community legislation concerning the environmental impact and strategic environmental assessment' (Mazur 2007).

Therefore, this obligation includes within its scope politics, programmes and projects implemented under the three funds.

The basic legislation governing the evaluation of the European Union also includes the following items:

- Regulation (WE) No. 1080/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Regional Development Fund and repealing Regulation (WE) No. 1783/1999,
- Regulation (WE) No. 1081/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Social Fund and repealing Regulation (WE) No. 1784/1999,
- Regulation (WE) No. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EUWT),
- Council Regulation (WE) No. 1083/ 2006 of 11 July 2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1260/1999,
- Council Regulation (WE) No. 1084/2006 of 11 July 2006 establishing the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (WE) No. 1164/94,
- Council Regulation (WE) No. 1085/2006 of 17 July 2006 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).

Another set of rules constitute the national legislation. In the programming period 2000–2006 the arrangements for evaluation were specified by the Act of 20 April 2004 on the National Development Plan, hereinafter referred to the RDP act (Journal of Laws of 2006, No. 116, item 1206). First of all, it introduced guidelines for the evaluation of the effectiveness, the efficiency and the implementation of the National Development Plan. For the first time, it introduced the concept of system implementation to the Polish legal solutions, which, according to the statutory definition, are: monitoring, reporting, control, and assessment (evaluation) (Mazur 2007).

However, the guidelines for the programming period 2006–2013, in the scope of evaluation, were approved by the Minister of Regional Development and in forced as of 30 May 2006.

These guidelines constitute the principles of evaluation system design of structural funds by:

- creating a definition and purpose of the evaluation of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) and the Operational Programmes,
- designing the institutional layout of evaluation and the role of the different subjects,
- identifying the extent and types of evaluation used,
- specifying the implementation of the evaluation process and the introduction of evaluation plans.

These acts give a clear picture of the system and the importance of evaluation for the undertaken actions. They define evaluation clearly and identify the types and the used criteria.

Building the entire legal and institutional infrastructure, linked with evaluation studies, were implemented in Poland in three stages, namely:

- the preparatory phase (covering the period 2004–2005), which was related to the construction of a evaluation potential in central administration and the implementation of the first evaluations;
- the second stage (2006), associated with the ex-ante evaluation of programme documents for the period 2007–2013 – building a solid base and developing previous organisational solutions (in terms of the evaluation commission, cooperation with contractors and dissemination of the results of the evaluation);
- the third phase, currently being implemented, related to the launch of integrating the system of current evaluation, including interventions in the period 2004–2006 (under the NDP) and the period 2007–2013 (NSRF) (Olejniczak, Kozak, and Lendzion 2008).

With the changes in the meaning of the evaluation, a National Evaluation Unit was appointed, which serves a coordination function in the system. The National Evaluation Unit is also responsible for the evaluation at the level of the NDP and the NSRF.

The main thematic areas in MRD, within which studies are initiated, are:

- socio-economic development of Poland,
- the development and modernisation of infrastructure,
- competitiveness and innovativeness of the economy,
- development of human resources,
- regional development (Olejniczak, Kozak, and Lendzion 2008).

The above cited areas derived directly from the main goal and detailed objectives of the NSRF in such that evaluation is submitted in a maximum extent to the implementation of the strategy. Evaluation in Poland is based on six groups of the Faculty of Evaluation, individual departments, Department of Structural Policy Coordination in the Ministry of Regional Development, Managing Authorities, and other various institutions involved in the management and implementation of interventions that are the subject of the research, as well as external experts.

Important roles in shaping evaluation in Poland and the Polish Ministry of Regional Development Unit are also played by the evaluation of individual operational programmes.

In the years 2007–2013, in turn, the evaluation process was carried out at the regional level, as there was in every voivodeship an established Evaluation Unit, responsible for the evaluation of the Regional Operational Program. In this way, a concentrated system created the opportunity for truly effective use of the tools, such as the evaluation of the ongoing projects, which provides adequate information in a timely manner to those who can use them in the management of the cohesion policy.

Evaluation research in Poland continues to develop. This is evident not only based on the Evaluation Research under the National Development Plan (NDP) for the period 2004–2006 and the National Cohesion Strategy (NCS) for the period 2007–2013, which collects and systematises all elaborations made thus far on evaluation in the following areas: the impact of the NDP and NCS on socio-economic development, development and upgrading of infrastructure, innovation of the economy, human resource development, regional and territorial development, strategic assessment of the impact on the environment, public administration capacity building and the implementation of good governance principles, but also a steady increase of funding allocated for this purpose.

In the years 2007–2015 about PLN 190 million (including about PLN 73 million in the regional level and about PLN 117 million in the central level) was planned in the entire system (Olejniczak, Kozak, and Lendzion, 2008).

The increase in funding for evaluation research in Poland can certainly improve the quality of research and professionalise the market research evaluators.

Local governments are playing an increasingly important role in evaluation, as they carry out their own independent research and evaluation (Faliszek, Libor, Nowalska-Kapuścik, Muster, and Szpoczek-Sało 2013). To a great extent, the effectiveness and knowledge of evaluation depends on how evaluation is assigned to fulfil its functions, including the function of self-improvement.

Self-Improvement in the Evaluation Process – Towards a Title Development

As with almost every phenomenon, so in regard to evaluation studies, in the literature one can meet not only the many diverse ways to define them, but also the many, often close, but sometimes very different approaches to the functions assigned to them. The causes and sources of this type of situation can be traced not only in an increasing number of studies and the resulting applications, but also from the fact that each of the scientists, researchers would like to suggest

something of their own, new, original. Something that would be a significant contribution to the development of the discipline, making themselves unique in their own eyes and the eyes of other authors.

In this article, the authors will not propose yet another typology function of evaluation studies. On the contrary, they would like to emphasise the role and importance of just one of them. The function, which shows almost all dealing with the issues of evaluation studies, both theorists and practitioners. This is the self-improvement function, which is in fact the reason why data analyses are carried out.

Undertaking evaluation studies should be encouraged by the desire to prepare and develop more and better applications and projects, not only by the necessity of the law. Evaluation studies should provide information on what has been achieved in a proper and correct way, and would require improvement or correction.

It is a human thing to make mistakes, but it should also be a human duty to learn from them and derive fully practical applications. Often, however, our belief in our infallibility makes it difficult to identify and understand our own mistakes. By nature, we believe that we do our best. Therefore, we rarely recognise our own mistakes, and are even less able to admit to them. No one likes being criticised for how they performed a task or job, especially if one has dedicated a lot of time and effort to it. It should be strongly emphasised that properly conducted evaluation is not in any event simply/just inventing errors in the project, but – by learning from doing – above all an opportunity to draw meaningful conclusions and avoid similar mistakes in the future. This is especially important when handling large amounts/assets coming from public funds.

An evaluation in a proper manner, and therefore one that ensures and guarantees the implementation of its various functions, is not easy and simple. Moreover, each evaluation study is carried out in a specific environment. The setting can approach evaluation with reluctance and mistrust. In such an atmosphere it is extremely difficult for the right attitude necessary for the performance of the evaluation process.

Self-improvement, expressed in a number of recommendations contained in the final reports of the evaluation studies, very often, though not always, recedes into the background. An important role is not only played by the awareness of institutions and organisations whose projects are subject to evaluation, but also the skills and competences of evaluators. ‘The obvious of course’ would in fact say that the importance of awareness and the positive impact of evaluation studies on the extent and frequency of their execution, similar to the statement that this is partly determined by the evaluator or the evaluators how the perception of their work, and so the essence and meaning of conducting evaluation studies, are perceived. Self-improvement therefore requires mutual understanding

and trust. It is a mistake to think that it is a one-sided phenomenon that affects only the evaluated subjects. Its two-sidedness derives from the simple fact of excluding the possibility of the existence of two identical projects. Each project is different, and therefore also each evaluation study has its own peculiar features. Thus, the self-improvement evaluation function also applies to those who carry out the evaluation issued with one, and so the evaluators. Also, in their case, it should not be considered only as a meaningless practice and professional responsibility.

Self-improvement covers as a result, a variety of subjects – institutions and organisations – not only those that might seem to be under evaluation studies. Still, awareness of the role and importance of self-improvement, which evaluation studies should involve, leaves much to be desired. This is despite the fact that in addition to self-improvement, evaluation studies also serve other functions. Among these there are functions connected with the improvement of planning, quality control, strengthening accountability, partnership and sense of ownership. In the case of the first two, a close link to the function of self-improvement can be observed. Typologies of this kind are in fact very often smooth, devoid of clear boundaries. This is partly due to the fact that evaluation has rarely only one selected function. In general, it is a set of several or more functions. Sometimes it happens that this function is not extracted, passing in a greater or lesser extent to another. This is the case where the function of evaluation studies is distinguished based on the criterion of utility.

Thus, self-improvement in the formative function is to gain knowledge about how to carry out evaluations and implement the resulting recommendations for the duration of the project. Therefore, it is an ability to draw conclusions from the ongoing operations and its constant modification to the extent necessary from the point of view of its effectiveness. This approach requires from both parties not only trust and understanding, but also a lot of engagement.

Self-improvement within the next function, and thus the conclusive function, consists rather of gaining the knowledge to carry out the evaluation ex-post, that is, after the project has been executed. The ability to draw conclusions and formulate conclusions based recommendations, which will then lead to applications and practical implications for future projects. One of the key skills at this point is the ability to persuade, convincing the subject under evaluation of the merits and benefits from the implementation of the benefits of the suggestions and recommendations. Evaluation of an ex-post is a kind of an art of effective communication and forward-thinking.

Self-improvement is also revealed in the case of psychological evaluation studies. In this case, because it is gaining knowledge about how to shape the behaviour of others in order to obtain the intended and expected outcomes and effects. Evaluation is thus the art of influencing the thinking, opinions, and attitudes of those under evaluation.

In the latter functions – administrative functions – self-improvement should be understood from the perspective of the ability to create and promote certain standards and strategies (Faliszek 2013).

Self-improvement is thus an important component of any evaluation, but not the only one. Very often, attention is also drawn to the role that evaluation studies play in social relations and social climates. It should be remembered that the implementation of evaluation studies favours the formation of inter-personal relationships and is based on the principle of partnership and democratic rules. In this way, evaluation studies contribute to numerous changes in their environment. Some of them are the result of the same effects of individual projects, but some of the consequences and outcomes from the analyses. The effects of these can indicate both gross and net, supplementation, displacement, synergy, a decrease in value and multiplication – are standardised in the form of well-defined mathematical formulas (Pylak 2009).

It would be wrong, however, to believe that these changes are always positive. Sometimes in fact it is the case that a mandatory evaluation is accompanied by many negative effects, among which one may distinguish:

- the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility,
- manipulation of the results in order to strengthen the reputation of the institution or organisation under evaluation,
- using evaluation to legitimise decisions already made,
- and using evaluation research as an excuse for a lack of decisions.

To avoid this type of situation, when the evaluation studies do not fulfil or improperly perform their functions, it is essential to clearly define their missions, the place compared to other tools, such as monitoring and control, to plan their steps and methods of implementation, and to ensure that all stakeholders actively participate in their implementation, while building on commonly accepted standards and legal regulations (Haber 2007).

Some authors, however, approach the function of evaluation studies in terms of a kind of bipolarity. In their view, evaluation can perform only some tasks at the same time. Thus the attention of the evaluators focuses either on the effects and consequences of the analysed projects, or on the process of their implementation, deployment, and management. However, it seems that the various types of ex-ante, on-going or ex-post can, and should, co-exist within a project or program, affecting its quality (Gałka 2008).

Therefore, the condition of the title development, not only in obtaining but also the correct implementation of the EU projects is the kind of evaluation that regardless of the stage at which it is carried out, ensure identification of all errors, as well as their immediate or gradual removal. In the case of ex-post evaluation, this identification is reflected in the final report, with an essential element which is the list of recommendations. The evaluation, however, would be a meaningless exercise if the function of self-improvement was limited only to entries in the

final report. The recommendations in question should therefore be included in future projects or their editions.

Evaluation Practice in the Silesian Voivodeship

Methodological notes

The aim of the study was to answer the question about the role and importance given to the practice of evaluation in Silesia. To receive an answer to that question, it was decided to invite representatives of local government units within the voivodeship, that is, the people involved in the EU projects in these establishments, to participate in the study.

Currently Silesia consists of 36 powiats (19 city-counties, 17 land-counties) and 167 gminas (49 urban, 22 of urban-rural and 96 rural municipalities).

The selection of the sample was therefore a purposeful sampling.

The selection of Silesia as *matière à penser* was dictated by the fact that, firstly, this voivodeship is economically and demographically one of the most important in Poland, and secondly in recent years experienced a number of changes, adapting its market and its products to the needs and demands of a globalised world, including by the EU funds.

Table 1. Rank of voivodeships according to the number of people – as on 31.12.2011

No.	Voivodeship	Total	Men	Women
	POLAND	38,538,447	18,654,577	1,9883,870
1.	Mazowieckie	5,285,604	2,529,656	2,755,948
2.	Śląskie	4,626,357	2,233,944	2,392,413
3.	Wielkopolskie	3,455,477	1,680,585	1,774,892
4.	Małopolskie	3,346,796	1,624,055	1,722,741
5.	Dolnośląskie	2,916,577	1,402,975	1,513,602
6.	Łódzkie	2,533,681	1,207,927	1,325,754
7.	Pomorskie	2,283,500	1,113,536	1,169,964
8.	Lubelskie	2,171,857	1,052,986	1,118,871
9.	Podkarpackie	2,128,687	1,042,100	1,086,587
10.	Kujawsko-pomorskie	2,098,370	1,017,093	1,081,277
11.	Zachodniopomorskie	1,722,739	839,291	883,448
12.	Warmińsko-mazurskie	1,452,596	711,551	741,045
13.	Świętokrzyskie	1,278,116	624,269	653,847
14.	Podlaskie	1,200,982	586,078	614,904
15.	Lubuskie	1,023,158	498,337	524,821
16.	Opolskie	1,013,950	490,194	523,756

Source: Central Statistical Office

The results should not be regarded as representative. This is due to the fact that the evaluation was carried out only in some local government units of Silesia and the reasons are described below. For some of them, the interviewers were refused necessary materials. Ironically, these problems did not exist when it came to information on the projects themselves. The data that was provided to the authors, served as the basis for the development of this article and its findings regarding the manner and scope of using evaluation research by counties and municipalities of the Silesian voivodeship.

A summary of quantitative research area is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Administrative units of the voivodeship

Specification	2000	2005	2010	2011
Powiats	17	17	17	17
Cities with powiat status	19	19	19	19
Gminas:	166	167	167	167
– urban	48	49	49	49
– urban-rural	21	22	22	22
– rural	97	96	96	96
Towns	69	71	71	71

Source: Information on the Silesian voivodeship, Statistical Office in Katowice. In: www.stat.gov.pl/katow/69_1044_PLK_HTML.htm.
Data access: 16.05.2013

Taking into account the percentage of individual units, powiats accounted for about 8.4% of the total local government of the voivodeship. Cities with powiat status 9.4%, gminas in turn 82.2%. Among the gminas, rural gminas dominated with 57.5% and urban gminas with 29.4%.

Finally, it was possible to collect data on 125 projects in 91 administrative units in the Silesian voivodeship.

The studies included a questionnaire, which consisted of two parts. The first part was devoted to general information about the project(s) executed by the unit of local government. This part had open-ended questions relating to the title of the project, priority, actions and sub-actions from which the project was implemented, the total cost and the sources of its funding, the key tenets of the so-called summary of the project, as well as partners who participated in its realisation and its forms of publicity (web pages).

The second part, in turn, related to evaluation studies of the project. The questions, therefore, were not only for the definition of the evaluation which was used in the study, but also for the participating entities, the criteria for the selection of evaluators, evaluation of research objectives, the types of evaluations undertaken both in terms of the purpose, aim, goals, the time of the study, as well as nature of the evaluator.

Questions were also asked about the criteria of evaluation research, the methodologies, techniques and the structure of the final report resulting from the study of evaluation recommendations.

In this way the data was collected, so that the quantitative and qualitative analysis could be done.

Disillusioned, and So the Role and Importance of Evaluation

The characteristics of the research material – a review of the data

The accumulated research material, as a result of the study, can be divided into three groups:

- the first group includes the projects where evaluation studies were not performed, or access to the results of these studies was impossible due to a variety of reasons (see: The evaluation of the EU projects as a wasted opportunity, so the reasons for the lack of evaluation studies);
- the second group includes projects that had true evaluation studies, however, due to existing lacks/defects they could not be regarded as properly and fairly conducted research processes (see: The evaluation of the EU projects as meaningless practice, so error and shortcomings in the evaluation studies);
- the third group includes projects with a comprehensive and professional evaluation studies fulfilling the function of self-improvement (see: Evaluation of the EU projects as a sign of development, so good practice in evaluation studies).

The evaluation of the EU projects as a wasted opportunity, so the reasons for the lack of evaluation studies

The research material classified in this group came from 79 projects that were implemented in the voivodeship of Silesia with the support of the EU funds. The analysis of projects was performed, by placing them in an administrative division of the voivodeship, indicates that we are dealing with 45 projects that were implemented within the 34 rural gminas, nine projects implemented in six urban-rural gminas, 11 projects in seven urban gminas and 14 where the areas of implementation were 10 towns. It is obvious that the group is not uniform, this means that the projects were both, projects that never underwent evaluation, projects in which 'a kind of evaluation' was noted, projects in progress and projects for which confirmed information was impossible to gather, whether such studies were carried out or not.

Exploration of the material also identified a few of the most common causes and the problems that gave rise to the lack of evaluation studies. Caring for clarity of presenting the results, they will be presented in points.

1. The most often cited reason for the lack of evaluation tests was associated with financial issues. It is worth noting that as a standard it is assumed that funding for the implementation of evaluation studies revolve around 5–10% of the project. However, in practice, there seems to be a belief that the costs are too high in relation to the potential benefits and effects. Interestingly, the respondents themselves could very rarely determine the cost of evaluation studies, and one can therefore get the impression that they are based on current, circulating opinions, which are not reflected in reality.
2. Another important reason for the resignation from conducting evaluation studies appeared to be the lack of a formal requirement/order. Respondents admitted that as long as there are no rules obliging them to carry out evaluation studies, such actions are not taken on their own initiative. There were explanations that such attitudes are dictated by two factors: the first would be the above-mentioned financial reasons, while the second is the belief that, according to the authors of the projects, there is no need to carry out evaluation studies because the nature of the project does not require it.
3. A common and often used practice (as well as a way of arguing the lack of evaluation studies) was the use of 'alternatives', that is, carrying out monitoring, summaries and partial reports. Interestingly enough, in describing the above mentioned activities, respondents often considered that they were pursuing evaluation studies and only after receiving clarification, by the interviewer, on actual evaluation, accepted that in their case we are dealing with something 'like evaluation'. A similar attitude may indicate a lack of basic knowledge about the specific evaluation studies and conceptual chaos, which allows fairly free navigation among such notions as 'evaluation', 'monitoring', 'assessment' or 'report'. It can be assumed that for a large part of the people involved in the projects financed by the European Union, indicated that the above mentioned notions had the same meaning.
4. Analysis of reasons for the lack of evaluation studies enables one to highlight yet another important reason for abandoning this form of self-improvement. A large group of respondents admitted that evaluation studies, though certainly necessary and useful, are *de facto* measures which are often very time and labour intensive, requiring a lot of strength and commitment of a large part of human resources. Undoubtedly, project undertakers still lack adequate support and good examples of evaluation studies that could overcome the barriers mentioned above which would provide a strong source of incentive to conduct reliable evaluation studies.
5. Another group of problems associated with the lack of evaluation studies are unfinished projects, which were being implemented. In these projects, altho-

ugh there has been no study of the ex-ante or on-going evaluation, however, the respondents could not clearly determine whether on the completion of the project there would be need to carry out ex-post evaluation.

6. The unused potential evaluation studies are also the result of unwillingness to cooperate or exchange experience between the teams responsible for the implementation of the EU projects. Among this group of projects, in as many as 19 cases, it was impossible to obtain the specific data used to identify the evaluation policy. Interviewers often mentioned three types of obstacles: lack of knowledge (respondents themselves were not sure whether evaluation studies were carried out on their designs or not); the fear of disclosure of information about whether and how the evaluation studies were carried out (this follows no permission to look at records or data of the conducted evaluation); communication difficulties, problems with the appointment of a person who could answer the interview questionnaire, lack of time and desire to take part in the interview.

The evaluation of the EU projects as meaningless practice, that is, the errors and shortcomings in the evaluation studies

For this group we are dealing with nine evaluation projects that were carried out within eight cities, 10 projects coming from nine urban-gminas, 19 projects in rural gminas, as well as five projects assigned to the three rural-urban gminas. It is worth noting that the number of projects is not equal to the number of administrative units identified because the authors of the study wanted to reach the largest possible number of projects, hence also in the analysis, all of these projects, which were subjected to the evaluation studies and those from which information could be gathered through the research of the authors. The total number of the projects in this group is 43 evaluated projects from the 34 administrative units.

Among the most frequent mistakes/shortcomings noted in this group of projects particular attention should be paid to:

1. Problems of terminology, definitions and conceptual problems. Both project undertakers, as well as those involved in the projects, had difficulty with a clear determination of the nature and importance of evaluation research, the presentation of their course, as well as determining the actual benefits that they bring. There is a common practice of free (replacement) usages of such terms such as evaluation, assessment, monitoring, treating them as interchangeable and the same. However, improper understanding of various concepts not only has adverse effects on the whole process of evaluation studies but it also makes it difficult to realise the potential and the opportunities that such studies present;

2. Problems and methodological errors (inadequate selection of methods and evaluation techniques, problems in the proper preparation of a research tool);
3. Imprecise evaluation goals, or – in a large part of the project – the resignation of setting goals;
4. Resignation of the precise functions of the planned evaluation studies (or wrong definitions);
5. The difficulties associated with the proper application of recommendations based on the study (respondents admitted that recommendations and advice are often not feasible, there were also reports drawn up on the basis of the evaluation, which did not have applications included in the proposals for further action or solutions);
6. Big problems also appeared in the incorrect preparation of the final report; a commonly used method was to draw up something like a summary or a protocol instead of the actual document – a report.

Of course, the above indicated errors and problems associated with conducting evaluation studies are not the only ones. The study allowed us to distinguish two important elements which, although not directly connected to the evaluation process, perfectly illustrate the perception of evaluation, as well as indicate the key problems associated with it.

The first issue concerns the broader communication barrier, which the interviewers, implementing questionnaire interviews had to deal with. In general, one may say that research evaluation was, for many respondents, quite difficult and demanded adequate preparation. A common tactic was to redirect interviewers to information posted on the websites, believing that the contained data should be an adequate source of data. There were problems in determining who in the project would be the person most qualified to provide relevant information and personal data protection was included in the dossier, there were also arguments of lack of time or unavailability (already archived) of reports.

The second group of problems is a collection of additional information that was obtained through other means besides the questionnaire. Respondents emphasised that evaluation studies are treated with reserve, resulting primarily from the lack of professional expertise. There is a lack of adequate training courses, there are problems with access to literature and other competent sources. There were also some that voiced the opinion that evaluation in different environments related to the implementation of projects financed from the EU funds is seen as a 'necessary evil', which (if possible) would be avoided. There is a lingering belief that evaluation is a form of control, a check of results, hence (by respondents and interviewers) there is a deeply rooted sense that both the evaluation alone and talk about the progress and results, is a secret, protected and unavailable issue.

The presented errors or omissions contained in the gathered research material lead to the conclusion that the issue of understanding of the importance

and significance of evaluation studies are more accidental based (i.e. the commitment of people in the project who appreciate the qualities of evaluation studies), rather than the commonly occurring belief that any research translates into successful design and creates opportunities for a better design of future actions.

Evaluation of the EU projects as a sign of development – Good practice in evaluation studies

Among the projects that were classified as sample projects we are dealing with 14 evaluated projects which were implemented within cities, and two rural projects. In this group we find projects that meet the criteria of good practice and demonstrate that evaluation actions are needed, and most importantly, possible to implement. These projects were mainly activities in large cities, where knowledge on evaluation among stakeholders is high, and evaluation is not scary to them but it is a tool for the effective use of allocated funds and actions.

The selection of sample projects was dictated primarily by the fact that, in our opinion, evaluation studies were carried out in accordance with any requirements and accurately and effectively discipline the public sector. To better illustrate the best practices of evaluation, they should be divided into interest groups, where the projects were implemented and the specificity of the initiators of the project. The first group should therefore include projects implemented by the Labour Offices. In this group, the following are worth analysing:

- The ‘Opportunity for You,’ implemented by the Labour Office in Chorzów. The study was presented on the basis of methodological guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Regional Development. The study was an attempt to answer the question about the real effects of external intervention (using ESF funds for the project system), aimed at professionally activating the unemployed. The conducted empirical research allowed to capture the level of effectiveness of the instruments used in the project activation of the unemployed.
- ‘TAK – Toszek Academy of Competence’ – the project was implemented in partnership with the municipality of Toszek, the Powiat Labour Office in Gliwice, Cech, Various Business and Technology. The main objective of the project was to answer the question about the effectiveness of the model of professional activation. The study was carried out at each stage of the project, which could be considered as a positive feature. Evaluative studies were covered by all the authors of the project. The responsible person from the institute where the project was under evaluation was prepared to discuss the merits and the choice of evaluators was external – quality and competence was put above the price. The project had certain shortcomings which were listed in the report, such as, among others, the inadequacy of time allocated to workshops in comparison

to the possibilities of the participants. It should be noted that this report was set up with great care and can be found on the project website.

The second group of analysed projects were the projects implemented directly by the offices of the municipality. The sample group includes projects that had investments directed to specific beneficiaries. It is worth noting that in this group of projects, there were primarily educational projects aimed at children and young people at risk of social exclusion and informative projects – education aimed at a broad audience, often engaging very difficult issues such as violence. The main objective of the projects was to equalise opportunities for children and young people. Evaluation studies in this group of projects were based on a number of research methods and research included the direct beneficiaries, originators and contractors of these projects. Such a way of gathering material allowed to capture the positive and negative aspects of the activities but also made it possible to draw accurate conclusions and recommendations. Some projects in this group are presented below:

- ‘Road to the Future of schools in Przysań – the project was implemented in a rural Gmina of Przysań, under the Operational Programme of Human Capital, Priority IX – Development of skills and competences in the regions, Action 9.1. – Equal educational opportunities and ensuring high quality of educational services provided in the school system, Sub-Action 9.1.2. – Aligning the educational opportunities for students from groups with limited access to education and reducing disparities in the quality of educational services. The main objective of the project was an attempt to equalise educational opportunities and reducing disparities in educational achievements of children, and to raise the quality of education.
- ‘Freedom from Fear – campaign against domestic violence’ – the main goal of this project was to improve the situation of families at risk of violence through actions to increase awareness and knowledge of the risks resulting from domestic violence, to promote active social attitudes towards violence and to increase access to information. The project was implemented in partnership with the city of Sosnowiec, the Centre for Social Services and Support, the police, the Social Welfare Centre and the Private University Humanitas in Sosnowiec. The evaluation in this case was based on the use of the sample of convenience (circumstantial) and survey tool was an internet survey. The aim of the study was to determine whether the campaign reached the largest possible number of members of society, and what methods are most suited. The evaluation was studied ex-post. The criterion that was used in this case was durability, which is understood as usefulness in the long term. It was also studied whether and how the co-operation between the institutions directly involved in solving this problem changed. The final report was made with care and attention, which brings with it its usefulness not only for the initiators of the project but also for those looking to the future use of the social campaign as a tool to spread knowledge.

- ‘Revitalisation of the market in Kozięgłowy’ – the project was implemented by the Gmina of Kozięgłowy. The aim of the project was to revitalise the degraded market and give it social functions, such as cultural, recreational and economic ones. The evaluation was designed to assess the characteristics of the project of revitalisation of the market, its effects, and to obtain information about revitalisation. The time of the study was to evaluate the ex-post and the test criteria were relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. For this project, the research methods drew interest: an overview and analysis of documents, interviews with representatives of the studied project, analysis of existing documents. In investment projects it is possible to touch the actual effects, but one cannot rely solely on these, therefore, evaluators checked, among others, the tendering procedures, the selection of contractors and management of the allocated funds. The report contains a detailed description and recommendations for the future.

The third group of projects were implemented by Social Welfare Centres. It is worth noting that these projects were implemented in partnership with other institutions. Evaluation studies were, in these cases, based on the selection of the methods and techniques suitable for the project. The project beneficiaries in this group were often not only individuals, who were directly affected by the objectives of the project, but also the environment of the beneficiary, where collateral activities took place. The specificity of the projects implemented by the Social Welfare Centres is quite complex, and the issues raised by the originators are, from the point of view of the man in the street, difficult. This is due to the programs’ attempts to solve a number of problems, including violence, rape, social exclusion, alcoholism, racial and social discrimination, and many others, and intervention was directed not only at beneficiaries but also their families and communities. The main goals were impossible to reach without the environment of the beneficiary. This is important to the extent that, in this case, the evaluation studies were extremely complicated and difficult, as the evaluators had to include producers, applicants, beneficiaries and the whole environment including their families, neighbours, etc. in the study. In these cases, the evaluators chose a lot of research methods and sources of data collection such as interviews, focus groups, observation, telephone interviews, questionnaires and analysis of documents. Such a magnitude of methods allowed for the in-depth analysis of the situation at hand and to draw specific conclusions and the identification of further activities. It is important that the evaluation project was carried out in three phases, the implementers could therefore confront the efficiency of their operations, which seems to be crucial when working with the local community. No single method would be appropriate in every the community. Projects of this type included, among others:

- ‘Take a chance’, carried out between 2008 and 2013 on behalf of the City of Rybnik by the Social Welfare Centre in Rybnik, co-funded by the European

Union under the European Social Fund under Priority VII – Promotion of Social Inclusion, Action 7.1 – Developing and promoting active integration, Sub-action 7.1.1 – Developing and promoting active integration of the Social Welfare Centres, of the Human Capital Operational Programme 2007–2013. The project was carried out with two sub-projects: The Local Activities, ‘My district – my place’ (2009–2013) and The Professional and Social Integration of People with Disabilities, ‘We are together’ (2009–2013).

The selection of the evaluation sample was determined by the following analysed factors. It was important to adapt the evaluation to the contractor but also to establish whether the evaluators were independent, and therefore impartial. For the majority of projects, evaluation funds were secured in the design phase, so the selection of the evaluator was external, and evaluators had therefore competence and experience in this field. A thorough knowledge of the subject of evaluation and specificity of the test environment facilitated by the contractor, ensured its quality and usefulness.

Another criterion was the relevance and quality of the developed methodological approaches and choice of research methods. In some cases, the concept was analysed with authorities, who often acted as experts. This is important, because evaluation must be an expression of the needs and expectations of the contractor, taking into account the possibility, in terms of available resources while preserving the correct methodology. And this proportion was maintained through sample evaluation.

Almost in all the analysed studies, qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The most common quantitative methods were paper and web surveys and telephone interviews with beneficiaries and project promoters. The qualitative methods included mainly the analysis of documentation and casual interviews with people involved in the implementation of the project and the representatives of the various groups and communities. In most of the analysed projects and evaluation reports the triangulation of sources and research methods was used. This ensured greater objectivity, showing different perspectives, a better knowledge and understanding of the issues and the follow-up test and verification of the collected data. A particularly important criterion for the selection of good practice was the evaluation report, its accessibility, usability of recommendations the effects of the implementation. The reports of sample projects were publicly available on the websites of the institutions that outsourced evaluation. It would seem that the inclusion of recommendations should be common practice but it was not.

Conclusions and recommendations have an important place in the report; these are usually presented in the summary of the results. Recommendations were presented in a clear and legible way, in the form of interests. Illustration of a number of recommendations in a clear manner allows one to capture the real indicators of the activities carried out. It also allows one to capture the strengths

of the project, as they were before. The chances for the implementation of recommendations increased because they were formulated in a realistic, accurate, precise and clear manner, and they were discussed with the various stakeholders, particularly those to whom they were addressed. When evaluating the success and the standard of evaluation studies were often decided, through mutual understanding, and to having the relevant skills and experience but also the provision of adequate human resources and time. Mutual competence in terms of the performed actions and partnerships at every stage of the evaluation process, provided a professional approach to the presented evaluation.

The study revealed then the condition for evaluation to serve as a sign, not a dead piece of writing, are the following factors: the competence of people performing evaluations, clear criteria for the selection of evaluators, correctly conducted evaluation, and understanding and co-operation evaluation partners.

Evaluation should therefore be treated by the authorities not only as a useful tool for the management of ongoing activities but also as a practical tool for learning and development. In the case of the above-mentioned projects, this approach made these evaluations, along with their capacity of self-improvement, the sample evaluations.

Conclusions

The research and the results which are presented above certainly do not exhaust the subject of evaluation of projects financed from the EU but are a presentation centred around the reflections on the self-improvement function of evaluation practices. A few further aspects should be noted.

The first major issue that definitely stands out is associated with the very small percentage of projects in which evaluation was carried out in an exemplary manner – only one in eight (12.8%) cases. Even taking into account the fact that in 43 projects (or 30%) more or less successful attempts to carry out evaluation activities (or recognised as such by the implementers) were made all the time, more than half, as many as 79, did not take into account the stage of evaluation. The reasons – or rather, the reasons given by the respondents – for this state of affairs were already mentioned above.

The data indicate that the project implementers face various barriers in their evaluation. On the one hand, it is often a lack of sufficient technical knowledge and the broader financial issues, but on the other hand, there were factors such as lack of conviction about the need for evaluation research. It is worth considering this argument because it suggests that, for a large part of the implementers, feedback seems to be unnecessary – or, in a more optimistic version – the ‘cost’

of obtaining it appears to be too high in relation to its value. This puts into question the importance of the self-improvement function of evaluation, which is sometimes regarded as a kind of unnecessarily addition to the project.

Optimism can be found on the part of the – admittedly small number of – individuals who coped very well with the difficult task of evaluation of the implemented projects, one effect of which was to formulate conclusions and recommendations.

What is important is that the projects in which evaluation was carried out and regarded as exemplary were carried out by different units: employment offices and social welfare centres (in partnership with other institutions) and local government units. Research shows that the above-mentioned topics and the methods used by the evaluators, were also very diverse.

It is finally noted that the curricula of courses ending in writing a thesis on a project, more often than not, have a requirement of creating the concept of evaluation of projects to serve the real needs of the communities to which they are addressed. Introduction of evaluation studies in humanities and social curricula is the answer to those responsible for education at university level to the needs of the national and European labour markets. By strengthening the capacity of the future of public administration staff and the third sector in the long run one is given a chance to spread and increase the level of conducting evaluation research on the implementation of projects financed from the EU funds.

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